

Sleeping with the Wolves

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In the Rocky Mountain West, the word “wolf” makes some people’s blood boil and other people’s hearts bleed. The wolf has become the poster child for a culture war being fought in the west.

Picture a small band of wolves: a mother, a father, their pups and a few others. The gray and white muscular dog cousins run and play in the sagebrush hills of Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. In the middle of the sun, they sleep. At night, they come alive. They howl and growl, stalk and hunt. When they smell the sweet scent of wooly, lambs, they stop. The wolves’ noses about 100 more sensitive than human noses, so the smell is overwhelming.

They find the flock of lambs and sheep, bedded down for the night, protected by portable fencing. The wolves are quiet, they are pros. They hide in the darkness, plotting their attack. Then, a dog snarls and barks. Flashlights click on. Boots crunch. Gun shots blast into the darkness. And the wolves run.

That moment is where the tension lies. Those sheep may belong to someone like John Faulkner, whose livelihood depends on those sheep grazing on the hills in central Idaho below the Sawtooth Mountains. Every time a wolf kills a sheep, the ewes get anxious, the babies stop eating, and the rancher loses money, time and sleep.

But, the wolves, for their part, are also trying to make a living, also trying to raise their kids up healthy.

Until this May, the Rocky Mountain wolves could roam about with relative ease. They were on The Endangered Species List, which protected them from being hunted or killed unless they directly threatened livestock, or a human.

In 1974, the decision to put wolves on The List was based on the fact that all the wolves in the lower 48 states had been all but wiped out by humans. There were no wolves at all in the entire Rocky Mountains. Then, in the mid-1990s, the government decided to repopulate the Rockies with 65 wolves imported from Canada. With the help of biologists, the United States Fish and Game Service flew in wolves to Yellowstone, Idaho and Montana. Officials, researchers and biologists said wolves provide a vital ecosystem balance, keeping prey populations –such as elk, moose and deer - in check. About 1,650 gray wolves live in the Rockies today. They're descendants of the initial 65. One by-product of the reintroduction is that tourists can now see wolves in Yellowstone National Park. In the Lamar Valley region of the national park, tourists stand for hours in front of tripods waiting to catch a glimpse of the Yellowstone pack. And, according to the park Web site, a sighting is pretty much guaranteed.

But ranchers, who are just trying to make ends meet, would rather not have wolves stalking their sheep, would rather not have the big bad wolf knocking at the door. And so, a cultural battle ensues: Both environmentalists and ranchers each fighting passionately for what they each believe is an embodiment of the west, the thing worth saving.

This tension is what makes sheep rancher John Faulkner's actions all the more remarkable. The tall 77-year-old in jeans and a Stetson is bridging the cultural gap between old west and progressive conservation, and leading the conversation between ranchers and environmentalists.

The third generation rancher, who owns Faulkner Land & Livestock in Gooding, Idaho, is a key participant in pilot project that aims to reduce fatal wolf attacks on

livestock. The Wood River Wolf Project, spearheaded by the nonprofit group Defenders of Wildlife, tests non-lethal wolf deterrents in the foothills of central Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains. These tools include portable fencing called fladry, flashlights, 150-pound guard dogs and night watchmen. Its goal is the peaceful coexistence of wolves and sheep.

But, the controversy stems from the mere existence of wolves in the Rockies, not just the money it costs to keep them away. Some people wish the wolf had never been reintroduced.

Then, there are the people who work for Defenders of Wildlife. They wish wolves roamed completely free. The nonprofit joined 12 other conservation organizations to challenge the delisting. That argument still continues in a federal court in Montana. If the judge rules in favor of the environmental groups, the wolf will be put back on the list, and will again be federally protected.

Meanwhile, in Idaho – one of the states that has taken over management their wolf population from the federal government – declared a wolf hunt in September, the first legal hunt since the wolves were originally place under federal protection. The Idaho Fish and Game Commission set a hunt quota of 220, more than a quarter of the wolves that live in the state. Each hunter can shoot one wolf during the hunt that lasts from September 1 until December 31.

To shoot a wolf in Idaho, residents have to pay \$11.50 for a permit, while out-of-staters pay \$186. By Day 10 of the hunt, Idaho had sold about 14,000 wolf-hunting permits, but only three wolves had died by hunter gunfire. The animals usually hunt at night, which makes them difficult to find during the day. Plus, they roam many miles a day, generally in packs of 10 or fewer wolves, so hunters don't see wolves by the hundreds. The hunters now will wait for snow, when tracks and fur will be easier to spot. Elk hunters may bring a wolf permit with them on the chance that they run into a wolf, who himself may be hunting the ungulate.

People with guns will scare the wolves, says John Faulkner, who thinks the hunt will help keep wolves away from humans. “We can have wolves, but we don’t need that many of them,” he says. “Keep ‘em down where we can handle them.”

Wolves are quick learners, and have often paid for their curiosity and smarts. In May, for example, staff at Yellowstone National Park killed a wolf that had become too casual around humans to the point of “panhandling.” According to Yellowstone’s report, officials “removed” this animal “in accordance with the park’s habituated wolf management plan.”

The same “removal” killing could become a reality for central Idaho’s Phantom Hill Pack, which could stand for a little scaring. “They’re particularly not afraid of people,” says night watchman Roger Olson. “That could be their ultimate downfall.” In 2007, he says, the pack descended on Ketchum, leaving about two-dozen elk kills visible from people’s homes. Because of bloody instances like that, many people in rural areas feel that lethal management is the only realistic way to deal with the predator.

Habituation, or at least interaction, seems almost impossible to avoid when coexisting is a reality. Wolf packs have been known to occupy territories up to 600 square miles. There simply aren’t many areas in this country of 600 square miles with no humans. Wolves get used to human presence. And, sometimes, conflicts arise.

In August, that same dangerously habituated Phantom Hill Pack took advantage of an unmanned group of Faulkner’s sheep, killing more than dozen. That night, Faulkner’s hired watchman accidentally set up camp with the wrong group of sheep. The sheep were alone, without the portable fence, without the flashlights and dogs, and without the night watchman.

The incident can be used as an example of what happens when the tools are not used. It was merely a “miscommunication all around,” says Jesse Timberlake from Defenders. But, he says, the one time the non-lethal tools were not in place, the wolves struck. Timberlake thinks this “unfortunate” event shows that the tools, when they are in place, work to keep wolves away.

While evidence points to a “fairly successful” debut of the Wood River Wolf Project in 2008, money is a worry. Mark Collinge, the Idaho State Director for Wildlife Services, estimates that adding Defenders’ methods to a sheep rancher’s operation would “likely at least double their labor cost.”

Portable fladry, for instance, costs about \$5,000. A fence made from skinny plastic dowels and thin wire with hanging strips of red plastic, fladry encloses the sheep herd, and, keeps wolves away. It’s hard to imagine is that a single strand wire with flags reminiscent of high school touch football would be any match for a pack of wolves. But whether it’s the sound of the flapping flags or the red color (or both), fladry is a psychological barrier for wolves. Defenders of Wildlife staff say the method has been used for centuries, beginning with Eastern European wolf hunters, who would corral wolves using clothing tied to trees and funnel them into a bottleneck. Once in a confined space, the wolves were easy targets.

A heavy-duty flashlight costs about \$70, and a Great Pyrenees dog can run up to about \$700. Add to this the \$23 per hour paid to night watchperson, and you have a pretty hefty bill.

While Defenders has yet to complete a formal assessment of the 2008 and 2009 project years, the group expects the report numbers to illustrate what they have witnessed in the field: that non-lethal controls, especially the presence of a person, greatly reduce wolf and sheep interactions.

Night watchman Peter Taylor, called “el lobadaro” by the shepherds, thinks the project “absolutely works.”

“I think cohabitating with predators is one of the most controversial, important issues in livestock use of our time,” the bearded man in a wool button-down told me during my visit. “Herding animals without worrying about predators is a very uniquely American 20th century phenomenon. ... In the past, it was just understood that people slept with their animals, cause otherwise, they got eaten.”

The willingness of ranchers to even give a chance to a newfangled, stereotypically “green” environmental project run by a group with a name like Defenders of Wildlife should be considered a victory for cooperation and coexistence of the differing cultures in the West.

“There isn’t anything quite like this anywhere else,” says Ketchum, Idaho based forest ranger Kurt Nelson. The success of this project, he says, lies in “the interaction that’s occurring between different viewpoints and building that trust and those relationships.”

Sheepman Faulkner is cautious about environmental organizations and livestock operations occupying the same landscape, just as he is about wolves and sheep doing the same. But, he’s trying. Faulkner says his rancher colleagues may think he’s crazy for working with the nonprofit whose very name betrays its politics. “[But] they’re not going to say anything to my face,” he says.

Faulkner says that wolves are just one in a litany of threats to his livelihood. Others include Big Horn sheep range protections that prohibit grazing, housing developments, water restrictions, and a decrease in demand for lamb. The aging rancher will eventually pass the business on to his sons, who, in his words “love the

lifestyle.” He hopes they will inherit a robust sheep operation, but he isn’t quite sure what the future holds.

“The bigger picture has never really been about wolves,” says Ken Hamilton, Vice President of the Wyoming Farm Bureau. “Some in the environmental community want this corridor of man to be out of the picture. ... We hope that eventually the public in America will recognize the importance of food production and start to say, ‘We gotta help these guys out.’”